



| Flash |

Political Instability in West Africa

F-2023-08-31a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: High

Intelligence Requirements: Military, Government

August 31, 2023

Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 8:00 AM on August 31, 2023**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

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> Executive Summary

Niger's coup at the end of July 2023 and Gabon's in late August have destabilized the wider West and Central African region in a way that previous developments had not. Coups in Mali and Burkina Faso came after worsening jihadist violence, and the military coup leaders were able to effectively argue the ruling politicians were incapable of handling them. That was not the case in Niger, where massive Western investments aimed at combating violent extremism and slowing European-bound migration had made the country more secure. Nor was it the case in Gabon, which has fewer security threats and a more stable economy. Concerns that insecurity will spread and the humanitarian crisis will worsen are well-founded, as are fears that the larger West African states could see spillover from the political and security upheaval.

| Analyst Commentary

When leaders of Niger's Presidential Guard staged a military coup against democratically-elected leader Mohamed Bazoum on July 26, 2023, Niger became the fourth West African Sahelian country to experience a military coup since 2020. This coup removed the West's most reliable ally against extremism and mass immigration in the wider West African region. When Gabon followed suit shortly after, it became the fifth former francophone country to experience a coup; however, rather than sparking a

global security concern, this coup mainly worries African leaders who have ruled for decades via undemocratic elections and consolidation of resources.

Since the Niger coup, the military junta has hunkered down and focused on consolidating its power using some of the same political maneuvers that coup leaders in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso used to remain in power: mainly, a three-year transition plan back that allowed the coup leaders to remain in power.¹ Niger's neighbors have pledged to return President Mohamed Bazoum to legitimate power and affirmed that all options, including military engagements, are on the table.

It is unclear if the Gabonese coup leader, a cousin of the recently-deposed President Ali Bongo, who held the same military position as the coup leader in Niger, aims to follow the path of the Sahelian coup leaders. However, initial signs indicate this is likely, as he has also put a transitional government in place.²

Security and Development Pre-Coup

Niger has been an island of relative stability and peace compared to its Sahelian neighbors. Niger under Bazoum was a more reliable partner for U.S. interests, which are primarily focused on combating violent extremism in the region than Mali or Burkina Faso were—even before the coups. The country's location in the center of the Sahel makes it attractive militarily as a coordination center, more so than the more-developed coastal states like Nigeria, Côte D'Ivoire, or Senegal. For this reason, Niger receives the largest share of U.S. funding in all of West Africa, most of which goes to supporting U.S. missions in the capital, Niamey, and in the central city of Agadez where the United States maintains a drone base.³ These investments allow for the monitoring of jihadist and insurgent activity and also have the secondary benefit of allowing the United States to keep better track of Russian and Chinese interests in the region.

¹

[hXXps://www.france24\[.\]com/en/africa/20230821-west-africa-s-ecowas-rejects-niger-junta-s-three-year-transition-plan](https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230821-west-africa-s-ecowas-rejects-niger-junta-s-three-year-transition-plan)

² [hXXps://www.euronews\[.\]com/2023/08/31/gabon-crisis-is-another-challenge-to-frances-african-strategy](https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/31/gabon-crisis-is-another-challenge-to-frances-african-strategy)

³

[hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/08/09/us-looks-to-keep-russian-ambitions-out-of-niger_6086343_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/08/09/us-looks-to-keep-russian-ambitions-out-of-niger_6086343_124.html)

Military support to Nigeria and the neighboring Littoral States of Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Cote d'Ivoire is largely managed from the aviation assets situated in Niger. Post-coup, these are likely sitting idle, leaving those operating in regions supported by U.S. military assets in Niger more vulnerable. An uptick in attacks is likely, particularly in the northern portions of the Littoral States and Nigeria, as well as in Niger itself.

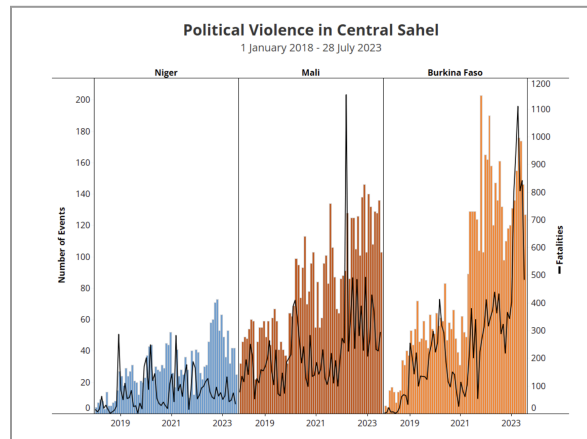


Chart showing violence escalating in Burkina Faso and Mali but maintaining a lower rate in Niger

Source: [hXXps://acleddata\[.\]com/2023/08/03/fact-sheet-military-coup-in-niger/](https://acleddata.com/2023/08/03/fact-sheet-military-coup-in-niger/)

Anti-French Sentiment

There are many notable similarities between Niger, Gabon, and other neighboring countries that recently experienced coups. All are former French colonies with deep-seated, anti-French sentiment tied not only to colonial era abuses but also to a continued French presence in the region in the decades following independence. Successive French administrations established confidential, mutually-beneficial, “family-like” relationships with African leaders.⁴ This effort was termed *Francafrique*—broadly defined as a French sphere of influence that extended across the former colonial territories of West, Sub-Saharan, and East Africa. French companies also profited, gaining preferential access to crucial resources such as diamonds, gold, uranium, oil, and gas.⁵ In return, the French government propped up friendly African regimes, often through direct military intervention.

⁴ Thomas Borel et al., *L'Empire qui ne veut pas mourir: une histoire de la Françafrique* (Paris: Editions Seuil, 2021)

⁵ [hXXps://www.dw\[.\]com/en/africa-and-france-an-unfulfilled-dream-of-independence/a-54418511](https://www.dw.com/en/africa-and-france-an-unfulfilled-dream-of-independence/a-54418511)

The widespread anti-French sentiment presents potential risks across the region, where local populations' anger over issues like the cost of living, inflation, and violence can be tied to their leaders' relations with former colonial powers. While coups are common across the continent, since 1990, nearly 80 percent of all African coups have taken place in francophone African countries.⁶ Overall, there is notable anti-French sentiment across West Africa, and anti-French movements could find success in other countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire or the former French colonies in Central Africa, like Cameroon.

Regional Responses

Within days of President Bazoum's arrest in Niger and the announcement of a new government there, neighboring states began taking up positions either aligned with or opposed to the coup. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the main regional coordinating body that comprises 15 states in West Africa, announced that it would proceed to a military intervention if Bazoum was not reinstated within seven days.⁷ The deadline passed without action, but ECOWAS continues to bring together military leadership to coordinate potential intervention. Support for intervention is strongest on the part of states such as Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Cote D'Ivoire, which may fear a spillover of violence over their shared borders with Niger or Burkina Faso.

Geopolitical Dangers of an Intervention

In addition to intra-bloc factors, ECOWAS needs to be concerned with the danger that any direct military action could lead to Chinese and Russian interference. Both countries would be eager to seize the mineral resources in Niger and expand their influence in a country that previously had mostly amicable relations with the West. However, it is doubtful that either China or Russia will deploy forces at this stage. Instead, they will likely wage a disinformation campaign to secure support for coup leaders within Niger and throughout the wider region. Similarly, despite the bluster from the other recent coup nations about coming to the support of Niger in the event of an intervention, they simply do not have the resources to assist, and their own governments would likely collapse if they diverted those they do have.

⁶ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-africa-66406137](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66406137)

⁷ [hXXps://www.dw\[.\]com/en/niger-tense-as-ecowas-ultimatum-to-junta-set-to-expire/a-66454670](https://www.dw.com/en/niger-tense-as-ecowas-ultimatum-to-junta-set-to-expire/a-66454670)

Conclusion

Insecurity in the Sahel region will likely spread further, particularly into the southern neighbors of Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte D'Ivoire, whose northern regions share demographic similarities to the recent coup-afflicted nations. Nigeria will also likely see some spillover. The humanitarian crisis in Niger will spill over into neighboring states as well, but also into Europe, where the migration crisis will worsen.

On the other hand, Gabon has well-established, consolidated oil wealth and has recently attracted international investment to protect its rainforests in exchange for carbon credits.⁸ The risk is that this coup inspires military and civilian uprisings in other countries where leaders have held onto power for decades or in those that do not have free or fair elections. Given the strong anti-French sentiment among the coup nations, Cameroon, which has had an Islamist insurgency and the same president for over 40 years, is among the most likely to see an uprising.⁹

⁸ [hXXps://www.un.org/osaa/news/gabon-receives-payment-reducing-co2-emissions](https://www.un.org/osaa/news/gabon-receives-payment-reducing-co2-emissions)

⁹ [hXXps://issafrica.org/iss-today/iswap-takes-aim-at-the-state-in-cameroon](https://issafrica.org/iss-today/iswap-takes-aim-at-the-state-in-cameroon)

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%